Sonnet

Explore the glossary of poetic terms.

The sonnet is a popular classical form that has compelled poets for centuries. Traditionally, the sonnet is a fourteen-line poem written in iambic pentameter, employing one of several rhyme schemes, and adhering to a tightly structured thematic organization.

The name is taken from the Italian *sonetto*, which means "a little sound or song."

Discover more poetic terms.

Types of Sonnets

Two sonnet forms provide the models from which all other sonnets are formed: the Petrarchan and the Shakespearean.

Petrarchan Sonnet

The first and most common sonnet is the Petrarchan, or Italian. Named after one of its greatest practitioners, the Italian poet Petrarch, the Petrarchan sonnet is divided into two stanzas, the octave (the first eight lines) followed by the answering sestet (the final six lines). The tightly woven rhyme scheme, *abba*, *abba*, *cdecde*, or *cdcdcd*, is suited for the rhyme-rich Italian language, though there are many fine examples in English. Since the Petrarchan presents an argument, observation, question, or some other answerable charge in the octave, a turn, or volta, occurs between the eighth and ninth lines. This turn marks a shift in the direction of the foregoing argument or narrative, turning the sestet into the vehicle for the counterargument, clarification, or whatever answer the octave demands.

Sir Thomas Wyatt introduced the Petrarchan sonnet to England in the early sixteenth century. His famed translations of Petrarch's sonnets, as well as his own sonnets, drew fast attention to the form. Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, a contemporary of Wyatt's, whose own translations of Petrarch are considered more faithful to the original though less fine to the ear, modified the Petrarchan, thus establishing the structure that became known as the Shakespearean sonnet. This structure has been noted to lend itself much better to the comparatively rhyme-poor English language.

Shakespearean Sonnet

The second major type of sonnet, the Shakespearean, or English sonnet, follows a different set of rules. Here, three quatrains and a couplet follow this rhyme scheme: abab, cdcd, efef, gg. The couplet plays a pivotal role, usually arriving in the form of a conclusion, amplification, or even refutation of the previous three stanzas, often creating an epiphanic quality to the end. In Sonnet 130 of William Shakespeare's epic sonnet cycle, the first twelve lines compare the speaker's mistress unfavorably with nature's beauties, but the concluding couplet swerves in a surprising direction.

Variations on the Sonnet Form

John Milton's Italian-patterned sonnets (later known as "Miltonic" sonnets) added several important refinements to the form. Milton freed the sonnet from its typical incarnation in a sequence of sonnets, writing the occasional sonnet that often expressed interior, self-directed concerns. He also took liberties with the turn, allowing the octave to run into the sestet as needed. Both of these qualities can be seen in "When I Consider How My Light is Spent."

The Spenserian sonnet, invented by sixteenth-century English poet Edmund Spenser, cribs its structure from the Shakespearean—three quatrains and a couplet—but employs a series of "couplet links" between quatrains, as revealed in the rhyme scheme: *abab*, *bcbc*, *cdcd*, *ee*. The Spenserian sonnet, through the interweaving of the quatrains, implicitly reorganized the Shakespearean sonnet into couplets, reminiscent of the Petrarchan. One reason was to reduce the often excessive final couplet of the Shakespearean sonnet, putting less pressure on it to resolve the foregoing argument, observation, or question.

Featured Poems

options

Sonnet 101 [Ways apt and new to sing of love

Petrarch

Ways apt and new to sing of love I'd find,
Forcing from her hard heart full many a sigh,
And re-enkindle in her frozen mind
Desires a thousand, passionate and high;
O'er her fair face would see each swift change pass,
See her fond eyes at length where pity reigns,
As one who sorrows when too late, alas!
For his own error and another's pains;
See the fresh roses edging that fair snow
Move with her breath, that ivory descried,
Which turns to marble him who sees it near;
See all, for which in this brief life below
Myself I weary not but rather pride
That Heaven for later times has kept me here.

Featured Poets

The following poets, as well as many others, are known for their work in the sonnet form.

Petrarch: Known in English as Petrarch, Francesco Petrarca was in 1304 in Arezzo, Italy. The earliest major practitioner of the sonnet, Petrarch is credited with the development and popularization of the Italian sonnet.

Thomas Wyatt: Born in Kent, England, in 1503, Thomas Wyatt worked in the court of King Henry VIII and is commonly credited with introducing the sonnet into English.

William Shakespeare: William Shakespeare, who was born in Stratford-upon-Avon, England, in 1564, published a sequence of 154

sonnets all written in the form of three quatrains and a couplet that is now recognized as Shakespearean.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning: Born in Durham, England, in 1806, Elizabeth Barrett Browning is best known for her poetry collection *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, a series of love lyrics dedicated to her husband, the poet Robert Browning.

Edna St. Vincent Millay: Edna St. Vincent Millay was born in Maine in 1892 and published many sonnets and sonnet sequences over the course of her life, including *Collected Sonnets* in 1850.

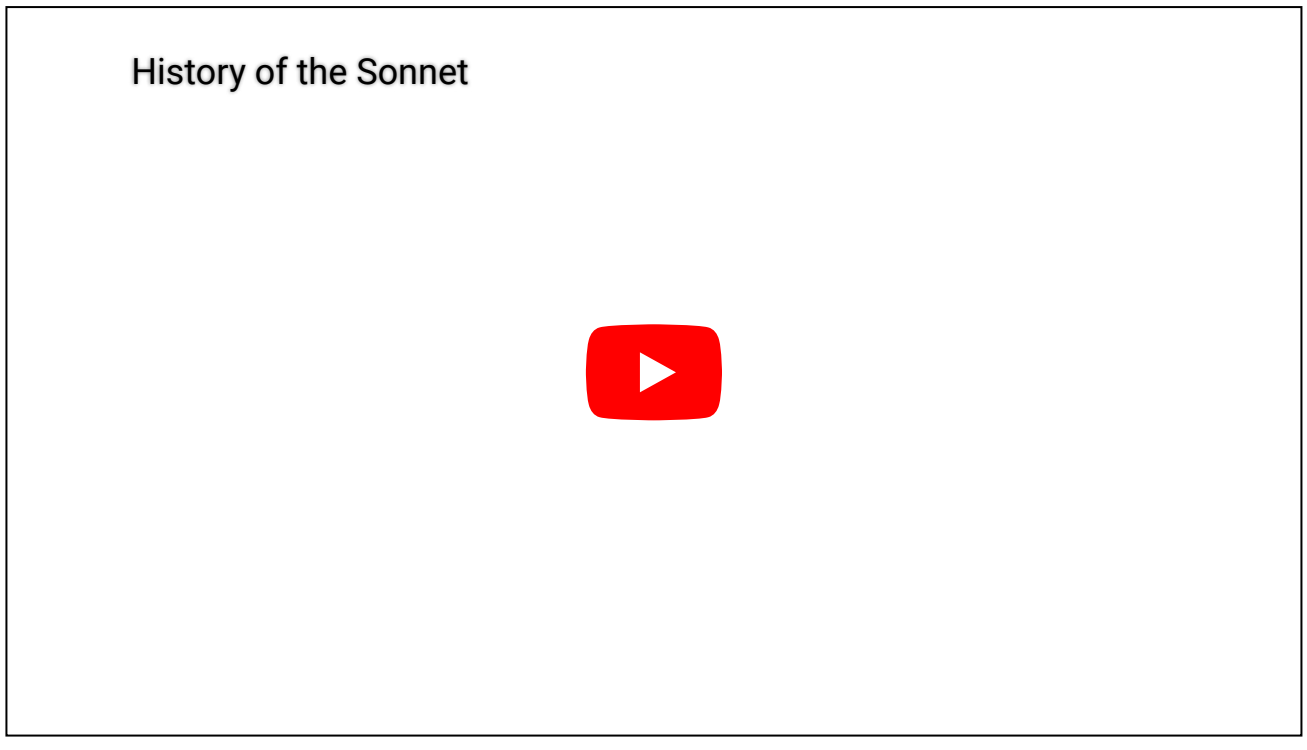
Wanda Coleman: Born in California in 1946, Wanda Coleman is known for her one-hundred-poem *American Sonnets* sequence.

Terrance Hayes: Terrance Hayes, born in South Carolina in 1971, received the 2019 Hurston/Wright Foundation Legacy Award for his 2018 collection *American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin*.

More About the Sonnet

The History of the Sonnet

The poet Linda Gregerson discusses the history of the sonnet form in this video.



Sonnet Sequences

There are several types of sonnet groupings, including the sonnet sequence, which is a series of linked sonnets dealing with a unified subject. Examples include Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese* and Lady Mary Wroth's *The Countess of Montgomery's Urania*, published in 1621, the first sonnet sequence by an English woman.

Within the sonnet sequence, several formal constraints have been employed by various poets, including the corona (crown) and sonnet redoublé. In the corona, the last line of the initial sonnet acts as the first line of the next, and the ultimate sonnet's final line repeats the first line of the initial sonnet. *La Corona* by John Donne is comprised of seven sonnets structured this way. The sonnet redoublé is formed of 15 sonnets, the first 14 forming a perfect corona, followed by the final sonnet, which is comprised of the 14 linking lines in order.

Modern Sonnets

The sonnet has continued to engage the modern poet, many of whom also took up the sonnet sequence, notably Rainer Maria Rilke, Robert Lowell, and John Berryman. Stretched and teased formally and thematically, today's sonnet can often only be identified by the ghost imprint that haunts it, recognizable by the presence of 14 lines or even by name only. Recent practitioners of this so-called "American" sonnet include Gerald Stern, Wanda Coleman, Ted Berrigan, and Karen Volkman. Hundreds of modern sonnets, as well as those representing the long history of the form, are collected in the anthology *The Penguin Book of the Sonnet: 500 Years of a Classic Tradition in English* (Penguin Books, 2001), edited by Phillis Levin.

Educator Resources

Browse lesson plans featuring poems in the sonnet form.

Related Resources

I think of the modern sonnet as an increment of time within a frame. Something that often physically fits into a little rectangle (but not in thought). Something you can utter in one long convulsive breath or hold in your palm. When my hand covers the page it disappears. It's a controlled measure of sound and space within which one can do anything. An invitation.
—"On the Elasticity of the Sonnet and the Usefulness of Collective Experimentation"

There is a story about a young poet handing William Carlos Williams a sonnet, and Williams handing it back, saying, "In this mode, perfection is basic." The young poet in the story is Allen Ginsberg, who, of course, goes off to write "Howl," for which Williams writes an introduction. I'm like Williams in that way. To me, a sonnet is fourteen lines of rhymed, iambic pentameter. I guess I understand why poets sometimes call fourteen free verse lines a sonnet. It sounds more accomplished than, say, "short lyric."
—Marvin Bell in "What You See Is What You Get"

"A sonnet is a moment's monument," Dante Gabriel Rossetti announced. In our own moment, Bernadette Mayer has invoked the sonnet as a form both "public and notorious" but also a form for innovative thinking. The sonnet, particularly in its Petrarchan form with the famous "turn" of its sestet, is only the most conspicuous example of the formal and cognitive turns a poem may enact.
—Maureen N. McLane in "Twisting and Turning"

One often views form in poems as giving a cohesive body to the mind, order to what might otherwise be inchoate. Sometimes the formal choices so clearly give a complementary shape to the ideas of the poem (Ammons's "Corson's Inlet," an obvious model with its fractal lines mirroring the natural line of the shore; Robert Hayden's "Those Winter Sundays," the fourteen lines of which emulate the rhetorical turns of a traditional sonnet) that the harmony of mind and body are patent.
—D. A. Powell in "Called to Order"

Essays on Specific Poets and Poems

"Renascence": Edna St. Vincent Millay Today: Alicia Ostriker discusses several of Millay's sonnets and offers a close reading of "Sonnet XLIII [What lips my lips have kissed]."

A Close Reading of "I Cannot Live with You": While not a sonnet, this poem by Emily Dickinson shares similarities with the structure and poetic argument of a Shakespearean sonnet.

The Young Insurgent's Commonplace-Book: Marilyn Hacker considers Adrienne Rich's "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law," which presents similarities to a sonnet sequence.

Of Poetry and Medicine: Rafael Campo talks with Cortney Davis about his work and his return to the sonnet form in multiple collections.

Interview: John Hollander: John Hollander discusses the frequency of the sonnet form in poems by Jorge Luis Borges.

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